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Religious Analysis, Gender, and Aesthetic Judgement

“Gender is aesthetic, not rational.”

–Natalie Wynn, “The Aesthetic”

“If they see breasts and long hair coming they call it woman, if beard and whiskers they call it man: but, look, the self that hovers in between is neither man nor woman, O Ramanatha.”

–Devar Dasimayya, “Vachana 133”

In her book *A Complex Delight*, Margaret R. Miles writes that images are not only “essential to religion,”¹ but that they “enable thought, making ideas concrete.”² Images, whether made or merely perceived by us, are the objectivity that subjectivity depends upon. In turn, they inform that subjectivity and its attending aesthetic judgements. Of all images, that of the human body may be the richest with cultural meaning. Overlaying the image of the body, gender itself can be understood as an aesthetic judgement. Socially constructed and visually perceived, gender has much more to do with appearance than with reality; ‘to seem rather than to be’ is the logic by which gender is interpersonally doled out upon bodies. Aesthetic judgements like masculine or feminine and male or female scaffold the ideology of gender, and these judgements are brought to bear on bodies through the cultural lenses by which we view them. Two of the most pervasive lenses in our culture are the clinical gaze and the male gaze, and both are most palpable when dissonance emerges between their aesthetic judgements and the bodies to which they’re applied. Intersex bodies throw the reality of the clinical gaze into crisis; the reality of the male gaze is thrown into crisis through the imaginary body of the witch.

Via a study of images of the breast produced between 1350 and 1750, *A Complex Delight* outlines how images and the lenses through which we view them direct our aesthetic judgements and the gendered ideology they sustain. Miles writes that “gendered roles are repetitiously reinforced in the symbolic repertoire of western cultures,”³ and her study shows how that repertoire is in a constant state of flux. The male gaze and the clinical gaze functioned as secular lenses which transformed the image of the breast—formerly a symbol of religious significance—into one of erotic and medical character. Being a quintessentially gendered symbol, a shift in the meaning of the breast meant a coeval shift in the

¹ Margaret R. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350-1750* (London: University of California Press, 2008), xi.

² Miles, 138.

³ Miles, 137.

construction of gender. Images, our lenses and aesthetic judgements, and ideologies like gender are all in conversation.

The clinical gaze cast upon the breast (and other gendered imagery) developed alongside early-modern anatomical knowledge production. No longer sacralized as the creation of God, the human body became an object for secular study. Physicians began to dissect human bodies at the end of the thirteenth century,⁴ and a professional medical establishment was formed over the following four centuries, excluding the women who had formerly practiced as midwives and healers by way of new legislature and by attacking them as “witches.”⁵ Social relations were not the only thing upset by this shift—so too was the ideology of gender itself. Taking cue from “Aristotelian physiological theory” which held that bodies were distinct due to quantitative differences in the humors composing them, medieval natural philosophers “put male and female along a continuum” of the same physiology.⁶ Unlike the “great chain of being” which informed the gaze of these natural philosophers, the clinical gaze established an “order of things” which were categorical and not necessarily linked.⁷ By the eighteenth century, a binary model of sex and gender had replaced the earlier ideology which considered “the female body...as a lesser version of the male’s,”⁸ different in composition but not in category.

Amnesty International defines intersex as “an umbrella term used to cover a broad group of people who have sex characteristics that fall outside the typical binary of male or female” and estimates that 1.7% of the global population is born intersex.⁹ The relatively low number of people born intersex confounded medieval natural philosophers,¹⁰ revealing a disjunction between their ideological lens and reality—likewise, the existence of intersex bodies at all confuses the aesthetic judgements of the clinical gaze. Through that dissonance, the clinical gaze’s operations may be unveiled. Herculine Barbin was one intersex individual who lived during the mid-eighteenth century when “investigations of sexual identity were carried out with the most intensity,”¹¹ and whose memoir was published in 1980 by Michel Foucault. Barbin was assigned female at birth and raised in a convent, but after failing to develop the same secondary sex

⁴ Miles, 89.

⁵ Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), 27.

⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Fragments for the History of the Human Body, part 1*, ed. Michel Feher, (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 214–215.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980), vii.

⁸ Miles, 102.

⁹ “The Rights of Children Born Intersex,” Amnesty International, accessed October 21, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/05/intersex-rights/>.

¹⁰ Bynum, 187.

¹¹ Foucault, xi.

characteristics of those around them¹² and falling in love with another schoolmistress, they were subjected to several medical examinations of their body before having their sex reassigned male by the medical and legal authorities.¹³ Barbin faced exactly the kind of discrimination Liz Wilson alludes to when she writes that “anything violating the proper order of things is likely to be viewed as defiling...humans have treated as taboo all manner of anomalous beings—beings who, like hermaphrodites confounding neat divisions of sex and gender, fill more than one classificatory niche.”¹⁴ Despite the judgements of the clinical gaze to the contrary, Barbin was categorically neither “male” nor “female.” Unable to reconcile themselves with their gender reassignment, Barbin ultimately committed suicide.¹⁵

In the memoir’s introduction, Foucault writes that “modern Western societies have...obstinately brought into play this question of a ‘true sex’ in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body.”¹⁶ Moving away from the medieval, Aristotelian conception of sex, the clinical gaze “led little by little to rejecting the idea of the two sexes in a single body” until “everybody was to have one and only one sex.”¹⁷ This rejection is alive and well today, as is evidenced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ recent memo planning to define sex under Title IX “as either male or female, unchangeable, and determined by the genitals that a person is born with.”¹⁸ The clinical gaze judges sex (the now ideological bedrock of gender) through aesthetics: the image of the body, and more particularly the body’s genitalia.

The male gaze produces gender through aesthetic judgements just like the clinical gaze does. It is not a filter applied only by men, but rather one forged by men; as Wilson writes in the introduction to *Charming Cadavers*, “by turning their gaze in the direction which androcentric convention compels them

¹² In their memoir, Herculine Barbin mirrors the aesthetic judgements of the clinical gaze by referring to themselves with feminine pronouns before they describe their gender reassignment and masculine pronouns after. I have chosen to use the gender-neutral singular “they” for consistency and to reflect what Foucault described as Barbin’s “limbo of a non-identity,” pg. xiii.

¹³ Foucault, 89.

¹⁴ Liz Wilson, “Like a Boil With Nine Openings,” in *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Fragmentations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 49.

¹⁵ Foucault, 115.

¹⁶ Foucault, vii.

¹⁷ Foucault, viii.

¹⁸ Erica L. Green, Katie Benner, and Robert Pear, “Trump Administration Eyes Defining Transgender Out of Existence,” *The New York Times*, last modified October 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/21/us/politics/transgender-trump-administration-sex-definition.html>.

to...female subjects inevitably interact with themselves as objects”¹⁹ as well. Like the anatomical images born alongside the clinical gaze, Miles discusses how the illustrated pornography disseminated with the printing press (within a century of its invention no less²⁰) coevolved with the male gaze, presenting “female bodies as material vehicles for male pleasure.”²¹ Pornographic imagery donated aesthetic judgements about gender to the male gaze—Miles quotes Linda Williams, who wrote that “pornography as a genre wants to be about sex...however, it always proves to be more about gender,”²² as it reiterates those aesthetics which compose gender.

Yet the male gaze existed long before the advent of printed pornography, as Wilson makes plain in *Charming Cadavers*. According to Wilson, Buddhist hagiographies of first millennium India and South Asia cast “women as mute objects of the male gaze” while they “represent entrapment in *samsara*—the painful cycle of birth and death—as a male dilemma while gendering *samsara* itself as feminine.”²³ This lens portrays women not only as reductions to their reproductive capacities, but as objects of male (hetero)sexual desire and therefore “object lessons on the folly of desire.”²⁴ To teach that lesson, Buddhist hagiographers used *rasa*, or “different types of aesthetic moods” to color their texts.²⁵ The *rasa* convey aesthetic judgements attached to images like “horrifically transformed women...with their ageing, dying, bleeding, and putrefying bodies,” who, according to Wilson, “body forth the truths of the Dharma that many people have to see with their own eyes to believe.”²⁶ But we do not see with our own eyes alone. Even (and especially) when we fail to realize it, we see with the lenses passed on to us by others—hagiographers, pornographers, painters, physicians, and so on—and it is only through those lenses that we can judge images as “truths of the Dharma” or even as “women.” In the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the nun Soma suggests that “femininity means nothing when mindfulness and insight are established,” and that only the deluded can distinguish between male and female bodies.²⁷ Aesthetic judgements cease when the lens through which they are made is apprehended and relinquished.

When lenses like the male gaze fail to be apprehended through mindfulness and insight, they can go so far as to convolute the agency at play between subject and object. According to Miles, images before the Renaissance

¹⁹ Wilson, 13.

²⁰ Miles, 122.

²¹ Miles, 129.

²² Miles, 123.

²³ Wilson, 4.

²⁴ Wilson, 3.

²⁵ Wilson, 58.

²⁶ Wilson, 10.

²⁷ Wilson, 8.

“were not valued for their aesthetic excellence, but for their ability to *act*” in the production of feeling.²⁸ Medieval viewers of art were invited to “look and feel,”²⁹ granting the image agency over the passive viewer. Like the artificial images she describes, organic images—objectified women—are given agency for the feelings they produce in men as well. The Buddhist hagiography studied by Wilson “cast[s] women] in the active but negative role of a temptress charged with keeping male observers in a state of delusion,”³⁰ just as theological literature in the medieval West “targeted women as the source of temptations and evils.”³¹ Active temptress or passive redemptress, women judged through the male gaze were—and continue to be—turned into images which act upon men.

Whereas the real image of the intersex body reveals the contradiction of the clinical gaze with reality, the imagined image of the witch demonstrates the contradiction at play in the male gaze. Despite religion “providing the ideological justification” for witch hunts,³² the majority of witches were condemned in secular courts;³³ the witch was the necessary, religious foil to the male gaze’s secular, constructed image of womanhood. Reports of the trials and executions of witches flew off the first printing presses alongside pornography,³⁴ and in addition to being depicted as naked temptresses in Protestant art³⁵ who engaged in “lewd, promiscuous behavior,” witches’ “demeanor contradicted the model of femininity...imposed on the female population of Europe.”³⁶ One popular example of witches’ gender nonconformity is their depiction in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The play was written in 1605, amid a “peak of mass hysteria”³⁷ in the witch hunt and for the audience of King James I, who was himself a fervent believer in and persecutor of witchcraft.³⁸ When the witches are first encountered in the play, Banquo exclaims: “What are these, so wither’d, and so wild in their attire, that look not like the inhabitants o’ the earth...you should be women, and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so.”³⁹ Violating the “order of things” with beards and wild, unfeminine trappings, the witches’ gender nonconformity was “rendered odious and frightening in the eyes of a broader

²⁸ Miles, 58.

²⁹ Miles, 5.

³⁰ Wilson, 4.

³¹ Miles, 21.

³² Federici, 3.

³³ Miles, 120.

³⁴ Miles, 117.

³⁵ Miles, 9.

³⁶ Federici, 19.

³⁷ Miles, 80.

³⁸ William Shakespeare, “*Macbeth*,” (Reader’s Digest Books—Funk and Wagnalls Division, 1967), xlv.

³⁹ Shakespeare, 15.

population of women,” lensed with the male gaze, “to whom the death of the witch served as a lesson of what to expect should they follow her path.”⁴⁰

In considering the aesthetic of the witch, it is of paramount importance to bear in mind that the witch was, from the beginning, an illusory figure made up and made necessary by the male gaze. The witch was always an imagined image, but an image responsible for the death of thirty to sixty thousand people in early-modern Western Europe⁴¹ and for the thousands more murdered annually in nations like Tanzania, India, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, and Saudi Arabia.⁴² The filters through which we see and judge images of reality (and irreality) have life and death consequences.

The gendering done to bodies through lenses like the clinical gaze and male gaze makes gender an aesthetic affair. The Mahayanist view, as Wilson explains it, holds that only through “the perspective of emptiness” do “gender distinctions cease to exist.”⁴³ But how do we trade our gendered lenses for that of emptiness? How do we, in the words of Frigga Haug, “reach a point at which we no longer see ourselves through the eyes of others?”⁴⁴ It seems to me that the first step is making our lenses known. As Foucault said of his own writing in *Speech Begins After Death*, “I’d like to reveal something that’s too close to us for us to see, something right here, alongside us, but which we look through to see something else.”⁴⁵ To make the invisible lens visible is to defang the authority of our aesthetic judgements, and only then can we “see beauty not as an aesthetic judgement...but to experience the person we meet as beautiful *at the level of perception*.”⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Federici, 20.

⁴¹ Miles, 80.

⁴² Federici, 4.

⁴³ Wilson, 8.

⁴⁴ Miles, 140.

⁴⁵ Foucault, 71.

⁴⁶ Miles, 140.

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